

The Hunter

Robert "Bob" Johnson had been looking forward to the opening of deer season for weeks. He had his tag, had made motel reservations in Bridgeport, and had most of his gear sorted and packed. Lee Wilson was going hunting with him and the two of them had pored over the geological survey map they had of the area. They marked where they had succeeded in getting deer and where they had come up empty over the past ten years. Some years they had gotten a Mule deer and occasionally they had to settle for a smaller Pacific Black Tail. But, venison was venison.

Bob didn't have a 'regular' bolt-action hunting rifle; he couldn't afford two rifles and had to settle on a Springfield Armory M1A. He could use it for hunting because he'd purchased 2 5-round magazines. He'd taken a ribbing over the years about 'assaulting' the deer but he just ignored them. He'd taken a similar ribbing over his hunting knife. Bob had one of those United Cutlery knockoffs of the Rambo-First Blood knives and he liked it regardless of what others thought. Someone had told him that the blade was cheap steel, but it kept a good enough edge for him. He figured he could shave with it in a pinch though he hoped it never came to that.

Some folks would have probably considered him a little eccentric were they to have seen him making preparations for the hunting trip. In addition to the survival supplies in the handle of his knife, he carried a military surplus pen gun. It was the small flare launcher carried by military pilots and had 7 distress flares. He carried it in his shirt pocket together with a spare box of waterproof matches. In his fanny pack, he had a survival blanket, 3 lifeboat bars, 3 fire starters, another box of waterproof matches, a spare pack of smokes, 50' of paracord, a small first aid kit, a poncho, a candle, 4 tea bags, a bottle of Vicodin ES and a bottle of water purification tablets.

Bob always wore a web belt and suspenders under his hunting jacket. It let him carry two GI surplus canteens, a cup and a canteen stove. His fanny pack hung off the web belt and the suspenders distributed the load nicely. Lee teased him about his soldier suit the first time he'd worn it, but more than once, Lee had gotten thirsty and wanted some of his water.

They left Mojave the afternoon before season opened. It was quite a drive up 14 to 395 and then on to Bridgeport. Lee and he stopped in Lone Pine for a quick bite to eat and to unload the previous coffee and refill the thermos. They got in Bridgeport a little before 8pm. Lee was complaining about a bellyache, but Bob just figured it was Lee's usual case of nerves. Bob suggested that they go get a beer and hit the hay; he wanted to be on the mountain by first light. He was surprised when Lee begged off; Lee was always up for a beer. He said to hell with it, undressed and got into bed.

The alarm went off at 4:30 am. Bob rolled out, hit the head and grabbed a quick shower. When he came out of the bathroom, Lee was still in bed.

“Hey wake up you knot head,” Bob said as he shook Lee’s foot. “It ten to five, I want to get some breakfast and get up the mountain.”

Lee groaned and half turned in bed. “You go ahead without me; I must have a touch of the flu or something. I spent half the night on the commode and my gut’s on fire.”

“You’re not going to crap out on me are you?” Bob asked, “I been really looking forward to trying the new area we picked out on the map. There must be three or four deer trails passing through that area.”

“Man I don’t know,” Lee replied, “Go get breakfast without me and I’ll try to get around.”

Bob hesitated; maybe he should put off hunting today and get Lee to a Doctor. He decided to get breakfast and decide when he got back. He went to the little 24-hour restaurant and got bacon, eggs, hash browns and toast. He had the waitress fill the thermos when he was done eating and went back to the motel. Lee was still in bed and from the smell of the room his stomach had to be good and empty.

“Lee, maybe I should stick around and get you to the Doctor,” Bob offered.

“That’s silly Bob,” Lee said, “I’ll get around in a little bit, get some tea and toast and join you on the mountain in a couple of hours.”

“I don’t know about that Lee, I hate to hunt alone,” Bob reminded his friend, “Man can fall down and break a leg real easy.”

“Bull,” Lee replied, “You haven’t tripped one time in ten years. Go ahead and go, I’ll catch up to you.”

They argued back and forth for a minute or two, but Lee insisted and Bob was anxious to get up on the mountain. He finally accepted Lee’s assurance that he’d catch up to him and put on his gear and left. It was about a ½ mile up to where most of the hunter’s parked their cars. He tried that the first year, but because of the altitude, his car barely ran. From then on, he’d left the car at the motel and walked to the jumping off point. It was fairly steep and it took him 30 minutes to walk up to the cars. He checked his map and headed off in the direction of the new stand they planned to make this year.

About half way between the cars and the stand site, Bob realized that he’d seriously misread the map. He sat down for a breather and pulled the map out. The topo maps they bought were from a different company and when he looked at the legend, he realized his error. The contour lines represented double the elevation rise from his old map. From the looks of it, he had quite a climb ahead of him. He took a sip of water from his canteen and started out again. He finally got to the site Lee and he had selected and located a good spot to wait for a deer. There was an old fallen tree and Bob walked up to it, brushed away some leaves and sat down. He thought about how hard the climb had been and became convinced the Lee would never make it.

In fact, Lee was still in the motel room. He hadn't been this sick in as long as he could remember. He called the front desk and asked them to call the doctor for him. The gal at the desk called an ambulance instead and the next thing Lee knew, he was being loaded on a stretcher. He hadn't heard the EMT's come in and barely remembered them checking him over. The EMT's suspected food poisoning, based on their initial examination; they drove Lee to the clinic and after a lot of poking and prodding the resident confirmed their diagnosis. The doctor admitted Lee for observation over his vocal protests.

On the mountain, Bob had been sitting for a couple of hours and hadn't seen a thing. He heard a sound from behind the log and very slowly turned his head. He caught sight of a Mule deer with a fairly nice sized rack out of the corner of his eye, but by the time he'd raised his rifle and turned, the deer had run off. He sighed and resumed his position. If he had it figured right, the deer would be coming from his right and would pass right in front of him.

About 15 minutes later, he caught movement to his right. He slowly turned his head and saw a small Black Tail with a single fork on each side walking right toward him. He very slowly moved his rifle to his shoulder and released the safety. The stupid deer walked right in front of him. It couldn't have been more than ten feet away. Bob was afraid if he moved his rifle, the deer would spook. He froze and the deer walked right into his sight picture. He gently squeezed the trigger and the small deer went down in a heap. It rose back up on its front legs, took feeble two steps and collapsed, dead.

Bob set the safety on his rifle and sat for a few minutes to let the adrenaline rush pass. No matter how many deer he'd killed over the years, he always got that adrenaline surge. He waited until his hands stopped shaking and laid his rifle on the ground and got up. He approached the deer slowly and kicked it in the rump to make sure it was dead.

When the deer didn't react, he took out his Rambo and cut its throat so that it could bleed out. He guessed that the deer went 120 pounds, give or take. Even after he'd gutted the deer, it was a little too heavy to carry and that was a bad plan anyway. More than one hunter had been shot by another hunter because he was carrying a small deer over his shoulder. Bob looked around and found a reasonably straight small tree. He cut it down with his knife and stripped off the branches.

Bob put the pole between the deer's legs and used the paracord from his fanny pack to tie the deer's legs to the pole. He hefted the load and walked a few steps to see what it would be like hauling the deer. It was awkward, but he could manage. He sat back down, enjoyed a smoke and got ready for the trek back to the cars. He slung his rifle on his left shoulder, put the pole on his right shoulder and began the long haul. Dragging the extra weight, which tended to swing slightly, was a little more than he bargained for. He had to stop about every 15 minutes to rest himself and his shoulder. He had thought that going downhill would be a lot easier than the climb up to the stand, but he was

wrong. The pole dug into his shoulder and the other end dug into the ground. He wasn't in a particular hurry; he had all afternoon to get back to the cars.

Just after his third stop, he approached the most dangerous spot on his climb up the mountain. The trail was a narrow ledge, maybe 2' wide. On his left was a 40' high rock outcropping and on his right was a ravine about 30' deep. He moved slowly trying to avoid having the deer swing any more than he could prevent. At the narrowest portion of the ledge, the deer swung left, hit the rock face and swung wildly to the right. Bob tried to release the pole and let the deer fall, but he was caught off guard and the deer, pole and he went tumbling into the ravine.

Bob came to a while later. His head hurt like he'd been pole axed. Those were the least of his worries. His left leg hurt like it was on fire and when he looked, he saw both bones poking out of his leg into his slacks forming a tent. After a few moments, or was it hours; Bob pulled out Rambo and carefully sliced into his pant leg. Both bones protruded from his leg.

He realized that he had a multiple compound fracture. It wasn't bleeding too badly, so apparently he hadn't torn a vein or artery. But God, did it hurt. The deer and pole lay almost within reach. His rifle was laying about 4' away and the scope had been smashed off the rifle. The mount allowed him to use the scope or the iron sights, but it wasn't as sturdy as advertised. As far as he could tell, the rifle wasn't otherwise damaged.

Bob allowed himself a few minutes to clear his head; and then he struggled out of his hunting jacket and released his web belt. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he moved his fanny pack to his lap and opened the bag. On a whim more than anything else, he'd added a bottle of 30 Vicodin ES tablets to his fanny pack this year. They sure were good for a headache and he sometimes got a headache after being at altitude for too long. He took two of the tablets from the bottle, recapped it and replaced it in his fanny pack. He then used some of his water to wash down the two pills. His hand brushed his temple and he felt a rather large lump forming. Dang, did he have a concussion to go with the broken leg? Maybe he shouldn't have taken the Vicodin, but screw it, he hurt all over.

It took the Vicodin around 20 minutes to kick in. He wanted to take two more, but passed on that idea because he had no idea how long he would be there. There were plenty of small trees and saplings in the bottom of the ravine and Bob cut three and used his paracord to fashion a crude splint. He tried to stand, but it instantly became plain that he wasn't going anywhere. When the pain died down to a dull roar, he looked around again to analyze his situation. He looked up but couldn't see the ledge through all of the underbrush.

"Great," he thought, "I'm at the bottom of a ravine with a broken leg and am not visible from the path. And Lee didn't show up, so he probably won't start looking for me until well after dark."

Bob had always intended to carry a whistle in his fanny pack; in fact, he bought one at Big Five just for that reason. It was still lying at home on his dresser. A fat lot of good that did him!

“Well,” he thought, “I’ve got a quart and a half of water, 3 lifeboat rations, stuff to make a fire with and a poncho that I can make into a tent. I could be a lot worse off.”

Right at the bottom of the ravine was a small creek, which barely trickled water. He figured he could crawl over the 10’ to the creek and get more water if he wasn’t rescued before he ran out.

Bob pulled the roll of stretch gauze from the first aid kit and used it to hold the gauze pad in place. His wound was protected from dirt. He gathered all of the dead wood within reach and used a fire starter to start a small fire. He soon had a small fire going and pulled out the canteens so he could retrieve the stove and cup. He poured the cup half full of water and placed the stove over a portion of the fire. He then set the cup to heat and pulled out a tea bag. While the water heated, he reached out a little further and gathered additional firewood. There wasn’t all that much deadwood within easy reach so he decided he’d have to keep the fire small.

The Vicodin took the edge off the pain, but coupled with the blow to his head, Bob was woozy. He hoped the caffeine in the tea would get rid of that. He reached over to the deer and untied the pole from between its legs, only moving as much as the task required. It took a lot more effort than he had expected to sling the poncho over the pole and by the time he was finished, he was exhausted. His water was hot and he made the cup of tea. He sipped it slowly trying to clear his head. He realized that on top of everything else, he was beginning to get hungry. Bob started to reach for a lifeboat bar then stopped.

“Why should I eat one of those nasty things,” he thought, “When I have 100# of fresh venison?”

The deer would probably spoil before he was rescued so Bob wasn’t dainty when he cut into the deer. He cut out the tenderloin on one side, slid a green sapling through it and dug one end into the dirt, roasting the meat over the fire. He’d never done that before, he guessed it would either be half raw or cooked to death. He realized that it was getting darker in the ravine and looked at his wristwatch. It was 4:45pm.

“Dang,” he thought, “It was just before noon when I fell. Where has the day gone? I sure hope Lee gets worried soon and starts looking for me.”

When the meat had a good char on all sides, Bob removed it from the fire and began to cut off slices. Somehow, more by accident than design, Bob had cooked the tenderloin to a perfect medium. He savored the meal as the light faded. He used the last of his tea to wash down 2 more Vicodin and laid back to rest.

He awoke with a start and it took him a minute to remember where he was and what his condition was. The fire had nearly gone out and he used Rambo to shave one of the pieces of deadwood into the coals. He was lucky, he figured, had he slept another hour, the coals would have burnt out and he would have had to start the fire from scratch. When the fire gave off enough light for Bob to see his watch, he saw that it was 11pm. He set up the stove again and boiled another half cup of water. He reused the tea bag, letting it soak for about 15 minutes. It had been 6 hours since he had taken the Vicodin and his leg throbbed badly so he took 2 more.

“I wonder where Lee is?” he thought, “He should have been here by now. I knew I shouldn’t hunt alone, but who would have thought I would fall and break my leg?”

When Bob had finished his tea, he thought about firing off a flare. He decided against doing so because it was nearly midnight and if Lee wasn’t looking for him, it was a good bet no one would see the flare. He thought about the emergency locator beacon he’d almost bought. He had checked into the Cospas-Sarsat 406 MHz Distress Beacons, but they were so damned expensive. The Personal Locator Beacons cost anywhere from \$300 to \$1,800 for the higher end models. The higher end models available were GPS enhanced. Bob had been looking at ACR’s gyPSI 406 PLB. But by the time he’d factored in the cost of the Garmin eTrex portable GPS, the price had been out of his reach.

Bob drifted off to sleep when the Vicodin kicked in and it was well past dawn before he awoke. The pain in his leg was much worse and the throbbing forced him to grit his teeth. He washed down 3 of the Vicodin to ward off the pain and collapsed from that minor effort. The pills worked pretty fast on his empty stomach and in just under a half hour, Bob was ready to start a new fire. He didn’t want to waste his fire starters, so he shaved a piece of deadwood into shavings and lit his candle. When the candle had a good flame, he dripped some wax onto the shavings and held the candle to the wax covered shavings. He had the start of a good fire in minutes and slowly added the last of his dead wood.

He started to worry. He wasn’t more than 1½ - 2 miles from the cars. Why hadn’t someone, anyone, come this way? And, where the hell was Lee? His stomach grumbled but there wasn’t enough wood on the fire to cook more meat. Bob crawled over to a pile of dead wood and threw it closer to the fire. He moved to another pile and after resting for a few minutes, threw it towards the fire, too. The crawl back to the fire was almost more than he could bear, but he somehow made it. He was suddenly very happy that he had taken 3 pills instead of 2. After he rested for a few more minutes, Bob carved the other tenderloin out of the deer and got it roasting on the fire. He sat staring at his rifle, a thought just out of his mind’s reach. What was there about the rifle, he kept thinking. The blow to his head and the Vicodin really had his brain scrambled; he just couldn’t put his finger on it.

When the meat had a nice crust, Bob took it off the fire and began to slice off pieces. He opened his second canteen and poured another half cup of water and set it to boil. He

finished the venison and brewed some tea. About half way through the tea, it finally occurred to him what there was about the rifle. He reached for it, released the safety and fired 3 evenly spaced shots, the universal distress signal. Poor Bob, it was the second day of hunting season and those people who heard his shots failed to realize someone was in distress. They assumed it was some amateur or beginner hunter who kept firing at a fleeing deer.

The doctor released Lee from the hospital around 10:30 am. Lee went back to the motel and when he didn't see Bob, assumed that Bob had been in for the night after a day of unsuccessful hunting and was back out today trying to get his deer. It seemed funny that Bob didn't leave him a note, though. Lee still wasn't feeling the best; so he lay down to get some more sleep. He didn't awaken until after dark.

Bob had tried the 3-shot distress signal once more. He only carried 2 five-round magazines for the M1A and he only had 3 rounds left. He decided to save the rounds until he heard someone close by. He was in a lot of pain and bone tired. He looked at his watch and realized that it had been nearly 4 hours since his last pain medication. He checked his leg; it was beginning to really look ugly.

It was badly swollen around where the bones protruded and appeared to be getting infected. He dug the small tube of Neosporin cream out of his first aid kit and applied the whole tube to the wound. He then took two more pain pills and added wood to the fire. He wasn't fading fast, but he was fading. Bob drifted off to sleep when the Vicodin kicked in and awoke about 4 hours later. It was still daylight and he couldn't hear anyone nearby, so he sipped a little water, took two more pain pills and drifted back off.

Lee awoke just after 6 pm. He was really surprised that Bob wasn't back. It had been dark for over an hour and this just wasn't like Bob. He called the front desk and the desk clerk informed him that she hadn't seen Bob since the day before when he left to walk up the mountain. That little bit of news got his attention and he asked her to connect him to the Mono County Sheriff.

Lee carefully explained his hospitalization and the fact that no one had seen Bob for 36 hours to the deputy who took the call. Missing hunter reports were totally common and the deputy almost dismissed Lee, but there was something about the urgency in Lee's voice that caused the deputy to dispatch a car to the motel.

A deputy arrived at the motel just after 7 pm, 35 minutes after the office had taken the call. The fact that it had been dark for over two hours added credence to Lee's concern and the deputy asked Lee if he knew where Bob had planned to hunt. Lee pulled out the topo map and showed the deputy exactly where they had planned to stand for deer. The deputy got on the radio and within an hour, a search and rescue effort was organized.

It was a bit late to go traipsing around the mountain, but since they had a specific location to search, the Sheriff directed that they check out the location of the stand. The helicopter was dispatched and the pilot flew to the exact spot Lee had pointed out. Alt-

though he didn't see anyone, the pilot noticed the blood from the deer and the guts and radioed back to the Sheriff's dispatcher that the missing man had been there and had apparently killed a deer.

The dispatcher directed the pilot to fly the most likely route Bob would have taken to get back to the area where most of the hunters parked their cars. The pilot flew the route slowly, but didn't see any sign of Bob.

Bob was awakened by the helicopter passing overhead, but by the time he got his thoughts collected and was able to fire off a flare, the helicopter had passed and the pilot failed to notice the flare in the air behind him. However, Lee and a Deputy were standing in front of the motel and they saw the flare. The deputy got on his radio and advised the pilot that he'd seen a flare and the hunting friend said that the missing man carried a military surplus flare gun. The pilot circled around and just before he arrived overhead of Bob's position, Bob managed to release a second flare.

"I have the flare," the pilot radio back, "It's about half way between the cars and the stand site. I can't see a fire, but I'll circle for a while and see if I can pick him up in my sunlight."

Meanwhile, Bob yanked a firestarter from his fanny pack and started a new fire. Within minutes, the fire was blazing and the pilot spotted it.

"I have your man," he radioed, "He's at the bottom of a ravine." The pilot gave the GPS coordinates and two searchers who were about a ½ mile from the location moved to the location as fast as they could; given the terrain and the darkness.

When the sunlight spot hit Bob he was elated. "It's about time," was all he could think. He popped 4 of the pain pills, figuring that the extraction would be a painful experience and carefully repacked most of his survival gear. "To hell with the poncho," he thought, "It's not worth the pain to recover it."

The pilot could see the approaching rescuers so he remained on location to the last possible moment. His was about out of fuel and only had enough to make it to the motel parking lot in Bridgeport. He called the dispatcher on the radio and told him to get some fuel for the copter to the motel code 3. He figured that it would take him about ½ hour to get refueled and back over the rescue site. The men were about fifteen minutes away when he left and the hunter had a pretty good fire burning so the rescuers shouldn't have any difficulty in finding him.

The two rescuers arrived at Bob's location just about when the pilot figured. They drove a piton and roped down to Bob. One of the men was an EMT and he prepared to give Bob some morphine for the pain. Bob stopped him, telling that he had just taken 4 Vicodin ES and he sure didn't want to die from a drug over dose. The men carefully removed the splint, taking care not to cause Bob any unnecessary additional pain and re-splinted his leg with an inflatable split.

Bob was pretty much out of it from the pain, the head injury and the Vicodin, but he was able to tell them to forget the deer, but please retrieve his rifle and equipment. The helicopter arrived a few minutes later and a wire rescue basket was lowered. The EMT and the other rescuer placed Bob into the basket, strapped him in and radioed the pilot to take off. They gathered Bob's equipment and started back down the mountain.

When the deputy and Lee saw the chopper leaving, the deputy gave Lee a ride to the clinic. He spent an anxious 30 minutes in the waiting room while they assessed Bob's injuries and ordered him transported to the hospital in Bishop for surgery to repair his leg. The doctor came out and explained Bob's condition to Lee.

"He should be all right Lee," the doctor explained, "But that's a pretty bad fracture and it will take surgery to properly set his leg. He also has a pretty severe infection, so he'll have to stay in the hospital for the better part of a week. With Bob in safe hands, Lee screwed up the courage to call Bob's wife.

He told her everything that had happened and that he would stay with Bob until he was released from the hospital. She told Lee how much she appreciated everything he'd done to help Bob and she would try to get to Bishop before Bob was out of surgery. Lee told her to take the kids over to his house; he'd call his wife and ask her to watch them. "Take your time getting here," he advised, Bob had enough pain medication in him to keep him out for several hours.

Fact vs. Fiction

I shot that deer in 1964 in the general area described. It was a Pacific Black tail and weighed 110# gutted. I still have those little antlers and if I could find a nice jackrabbit would consider having a taxidermist make me a "jackalope". The part about the car not making it up the mountain is also true. The rest of the story is just my imagination. The 406 MHz beacons are now available and run \$500-\$700 with in integral GPS. If you can afford one, I believe they are a good investment. The ones with the GPS built in pinpoint your location within less than 100'.

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